Studies in Visual Communication

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Winter 1981*

Article 4

1981

Photographs of the Piegan by Roland Reed (Photo Essay)

Roland Reed

Photographs of the Piegan by Roland Reed (Photo Essay)

Photographs of the Piegan by Roland Reed[1] (Photo Essay)

Editor's Introduction: Jay Ruby

By the end of the nineteenth century the era of photographic exploration gave way to a period of photographic documentation. We were becoming aware that our natural resources, physical and human, were being irrevocably altered by the advance of civilization. Through the photographs of William Henry Jackson and the other explorer photographers we had discovered the beauty of the West and were now concerned for its preservation.

As western expansion caused us to come into increasingly less hostile contact with Native Americans, some people began to view them not as savages to be exterminated, or if possible converted to a civilized state, but as remnants of a "vanishing race" whose style of life must be recorded and preserved before it goes away.

Journalists, novelists, anthropologists, and photographers all shared in the desire to do salvage ethnography, to find the last remaining person who could recall the good old days, to collect the art and artifacts for museums, and to obtain photographic images of their nobility.

During the first quarter of this century dozens of people devoted their lives and fortunes to making a photographic record of the Native American. Many of these images are lost forever; most are scarcely known, and only a very few have been subjected to any rigorous study. While most people are aware of the work of Edward Curtis, virtually no one knows the photographs of Roland Reed. A glance at the images reproduced here makes a strong case for the idea that popularity and obscurity are often due more to the whim of history and happenstance than the merits of the works. Curtis traveled in influential circles and obtained hundreds of thousands of dollars from men like J. Pierpont Morgan to support his work. Consequently, he was able to produce a monumental study. Reed had no support outside of his own savings and the revenue from the sale of his photographs. Most of his photographs were never published in any form.

Roland Reed was born of Scottish ancestry in 1864 in a log cabin on his parent's farm in the Fox River Valley in Wisconsin. A trail used by the Menominie Indians to travel from Lake Poygan to Fond du Lac ran close to his home. In the notes which have survived with his photographs Reed wrote about his early experiences with Native Americans.

Jay Ruby is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Temple University and Co-Editor of Studies in Visual Communication.

> A band of Menominies lived on the north shore of Lake Poygan directly across from my home. In the spring of 1871, my schoolteacher and two of his pupils—boys about sixteen years old—took a canoe and went across the lake to gather some evergreens to decorate the schoolroom. Returning, their overloaded canoe overturned and the teacher was drowned. When nearly exhausted, [the boys] were discovered by three Indians who brought them ashore, made some hot broth for them, and then dug a hole deep in a haystack where they stayed the night. This the Indians did to bring back their circulation and warm them up. I knew these Indians well, especially one called Thundercloud who was chief of this band and who, after the rescue of the boys, became the hero of my boyhood days. Undoubtedly, this incident stimulated in me a regard for the Indian which has grown with the years.

Reed left home at an early age to seek the adventures and fortunes that many Americans believed existed "out there" somewhere. He traveled and worked in Canada, the Midwest, and the Southwest. By now his interest in Indian life had grown.

> I don't know why, but no trip I could plan satisfied me unless it led into Indian country.

By 1890 Reed began to make crayon and pencil drawings, mainly portraits of Indians and landscapes. None of these sketches has survived. But we do know that he made these drawings along the route of the Great Northern Railroad and that the Blackfeet people of Montana were among his earliest subjects. Dissatisfied with his own artistry, Reed contemplated the possibility of using a camera.

> If I could master this seemingly easy way of making pictures, I would have no trouble in getting all the Indian pictures I wanted.

In 1893 Reed became an apprentice to Daniel Dutro, Civil War veteran, prospector, and traveling photographer. For the next four years Reed and Dutro traveled together from town to town doing portrait work and selling some photographs of Indians to the News Department of the Great Northern Railroad.

Reed left Dutro in 1897 to photograph the Alaskan Gold Rush. In addition to covering the event for Associated Press, Reed attempted to photograph Indians in Alaska. However, they did not appeal to him.

> They made such a poor impression on me that I left for the states on the first ship south in the spring without making any pictures worthwhile.

Roland Reed (date unknown).

Reed returned to the States and in 1890 founded a photographic studio in Bemidji, Minnesota (later he also opened one in Ortonville) near the Ojibway people. Reed's portrait business prospered and enabled him to pursue on a part-time basis the photographing of some Ojibway. Reed recounts his early attempts at gaining rapport after an initial rejection.

> "I stayed on thinking something would happen to soften their distaste for me, and it did at last.
>
> "One morning two small girls came in and asked if I would take a picture of their brother who was sick—maybe dying." Reed went with them to their camp and photographed the little boy, but the next day he left for Bemidji. It was several months before he made a second trip to the Ponemah village—carrying a print of the Indian lad. As soon as the father of the boy learned he was back, he approached Reed, asking if he had brought a picture of his son. Reed handed the print to him. The Indian walked away with the picture and stood for some time with his back to Reed, looking at it. Then he returned to the photographer and asked the cost of the portrait. Reed replied by asking about the boy. The child was dead, he learned. Reed quietly told the father that he was glad he had been able to make the picture in time and that it was a gift. He wrote: "That fine old father gave me his hand, and from that time on, I was welcome to any part of Cross Lake Point."
> [Johnston 1979:]

Roland Reed's studio (date unknown).

By 1907 the conflict between earning a living photographing the middle class of small towns in Minnesota and documenting the rapidly changing traditions of the American Indian became unbearable. Reed closed his studio and devoted the remainder of his life to producing a photographic record of Indian life. Using an 11 by 14 glass-plate camera Reed photographed the Chippewa or Ojibway, the Blackfeet (Piegan and Blood divisions), the Cheyenne, the Crow, the Navajo, and the Hopi.

Reed was not a prolific photographer. According to Johnston "his first three years among the Indians produced scarcely a score of negative. . . . Reed considered a dozen superior photographs a worthwhile reward for a year's effort" (1979:56).

Reed did gain some recognition for one picture, "The Pottery Maker" (Hopi) by winning a gold medal in 1915 at the Panama-California Exposition. Between his savings, and the monies received from the sale of his Indian photographs to the *National Geographic* (the only authorized publication source for his work), Reed was able to survive with some integrity. According to Johnston, he once refused an offer of $15,000 from an advertising firm for 200 of his negatives (1979:56).

Apparently Reed planned to publish a volume of his Indian photographs. His plans for the book together with any diaries, journals, or extensive field notes have not survived. We have only his photographs, negatives, a few letters, and some brief notes to reconstruct his life and work.

It is not certain exactly how Reed worked, but in a letter he describes some of his procedures:

> In approaching the Indian for the purpose of taking his picture, it is necessary to respect his stoicism and reticence which have so often been the despair of the amateur photographer. A friend once characterized my method of attack as indicative of Chinese patience, book-agent persistence, and Arab subtlety. In going into a new tribe with photographic paraphernalia, although I hire ponies and guides, I never once suggest the object of my visit.
>
> When the Indians, out of curiosity, at last inquire about my work, I reply casually, "Oh, when I'm at home, I'm a picture-taking man." Perhaps within a few days an Indian will ask, "You say you are a picture-taking man. Could you make our pictures?" My reply is non-commital—"I don't know. Perhaps." "Would you try?" "Sometime, when I feel like making pictures." Further time elapses; apparently the picture-taking man has forgotten all about making pictures until an Indian friend reminds him of his promise. Then the time for picture-making has arrived.

And in a rare note Reed describes the actual taking of a particular photograph in 1908.

> The two Chippewas, in full hunting regalia, were monotonously paddling a canoe back and forth over the blue waters of a lake in northern Minnesota. I had the bow Indian stolidly discharging an arrow at a certain buoy each time the birchbark passed it. "More life to it, Yellow Face," I cried. "You wouldn't shoot a deer in that fashion!" "I'm not shooting a deer," he replied, "I am shooting a tree." "Imagine a deer," I rejoined. "Think you see a deer swimming, trying to get away." "How can I see a deer when there is no deer?" he quietly came back at me.
>
> To this there was no answer. The afternoon light was growing yellow but the shadows and reflections in the shining lake were at their best. I had been paying these fellows a regular wage for three days in an effort to get this one picture. Suddenly I drew out a handful of silver dollars and stuck them targetwise in the crevices of the tree bark. "Make one more round, Yellow Face, while the light lasts," I shouted. "Shoot at these silver dollars as you pass the buoy. Every one you knock down is yours." On the next round the archer's eyes blazed with a savage light; his body quivered with all of the thrill of the hunt as he centered five silver dollars with seven whizzing shafts. When it was over the air still hummed with the twang of his bowstring, and I was out five dollars, but I had one of the very few animated Indian photographs in existence.

Roland Reed as a young man (date unknown).

By 1932 Reed concluded "that it was no longer possible to obtain authentic Indian pictures, the Indians' historic costumes and accoutrements had all been sold to tourists, and few examples of pure racial types were still alive" (Johnston 1979:54).

After his death in 1934 Reed's collection was given to his cousin Roy E. Williams, who used it in lectures to school children. Recently the entire collection was acquired by the Kramer Gallery in St. Paul, Minnesota. They are currently in the process of conserving the collection and making it available to the public.

The photographs contained in this essay were selected from the 70-odd negatives that remain of Reed's work among the Chippewa, the Cheyenne, and especially the Piegan and Blood divisions of the Blackfeet tribe. While the Piegan were among the first Indians that Reed sketched, these photographs as far as we can ascertain have never been published before now.

The Piegan and other Blackfeet people live in Montana and Alberta, Canada. Traditionally they were nomadic hunters and gatherers, living in tipis; they follow the buffalo as their main subsistence source (Ewers 1958). The hunting band was the basic economic, political, and social unit. Men were organized into warrior and medicine societies. Small-scale raiding between bands was endemic since it provided young men with a chance to demonstrate their generosity, bravery, wisdom, and skill—the basic values of the culture. Their religious system revolved around the personal acquisition of a guardian spirit and supernatural power through ceremonies like the Sun Dance. In short, the Blackfeet fulfill most of our popular images of what an Indian should be.

By 1787, when a Hudson's Bay trader, David Thompson, spent a winter with the Piegan (Glover 1962:48), they had already obtained horses, guns, metal, and smallpox from indirect contact with Europeans. For the next hundred years the Blackfeet used the "gifts" of civilization to hunt and roam the Northern Plains. After two unsuccessful hunting seasons in 1883–1884 the Blackfeet came to the United States government agency, which had been established in 1855, to ask for assistance. Ewers (1958: 293–294) estimates that in the winter of 1883–1884 one quarter of all Piegans died from starvation.

In 1888 the Blackfeet signed a treaty relinquishing most of their lands and agreed to settle on a reservation in exchange for $150,000 in goods and services to be given to them over a 10-year period. For the next 50 years the United States government instituted a series of unsuccessful projects designed to turn these nomadic hunters into cattle raisers and farmers.

In 1890 the Holy Family Mission school opened. Christianity rapidly replaced the traditional religion. Blackfeet children were forbidden to speak their own language in school (U.S. Commission for Indian Affairs 1893:14). Other aspects of their culture were actually outlawed. "Sun dances, Indian mourning, Indian medicine, beating of the tom-tom, gambling, wearing of Indian costumes . . . selling, trading, exchanging or giving away anything issued to them have been prohibited, while other less pernicious practices, such as horse-racing, face-painting, etc., are discouraged" (U.S. Commission for Indian Affairs 1894:159).

When Reed photographed the Piegan in 1908 he obviously reconstructed (or, to be more accurate, constructed). His interest in portraits and landscapes where a few people stand in very formal poses may be both an aesthetic choice and a pragmatic decision based upon the absence of traditional ceremonial or social life. With the aid of elderly people who had lived the "old" life, Reed constructed his version of these people. He has left us with an important resource. His photographs speak of the complex collaboration between the photographed and the photographer, each conspiring with the other to produce an image that satisfies their notion of what life used to be.

Acknowledgments

The material for this article was taken from Johnston (1979), McFee (1972), and Roland Reed's notes and letters. I wish to thank Leon Kramer of the Kramer Gallery for his permission to publish Reed's photographs and for his cooperation and assistance.

Note

1 All photographs accompanying this article are reproduced courtesy of Kramer Gallery, St. Paul, Minn.

References

- Ewers, John C.
  1958 The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Glover, Richard
  1962 David Thompson's Narrative: 1784–1812. Toronto: The Champlain Society Press.
- Johnston, Patricia Condon
  1979 The Indian Photographs of Roland Reed. American West.
- McFee, Malcolm
  1972 Modern Blackfeet: Montanans on a Reservation. New York: Holt.

Figure 1 *Buffalo Hump.* Cheyenne.

Figure 2 *At the Spring.* Chippewa.


Copyright

Figure 3 *The Fisherman.*
Chippewa.

Figure 4 Unidentified.
Piegan male.

Figure 5 Unidentified. Piegan woman.

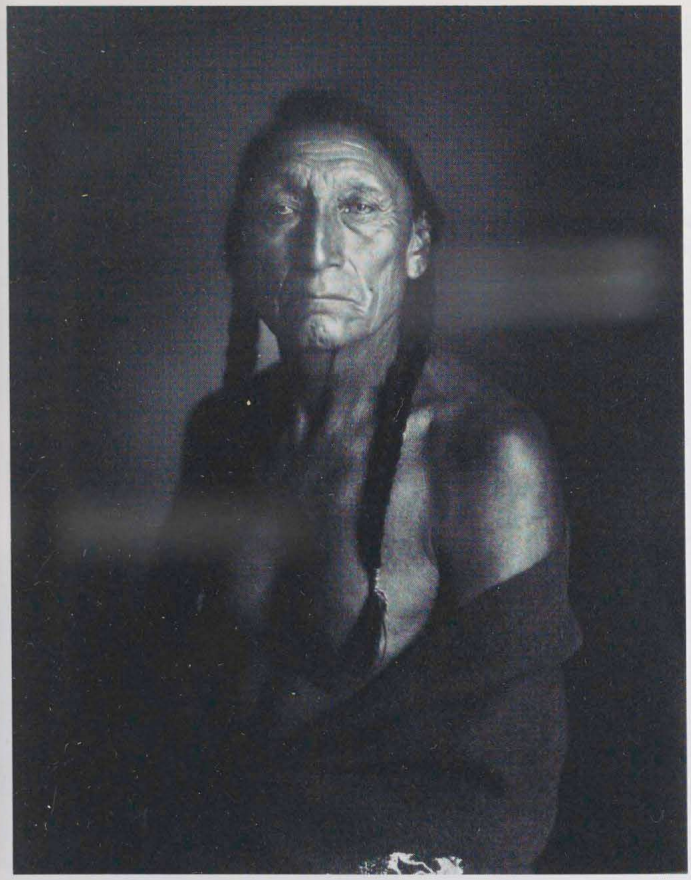

Figure 6 *Curley Bear.* Piegan.

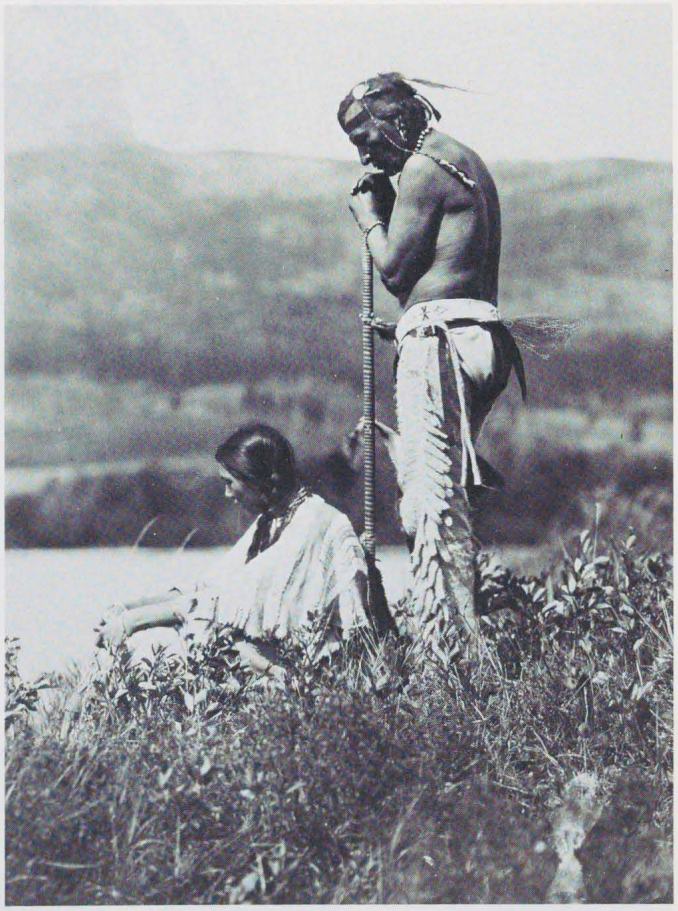

Figure 8 *Meditation.* Piegan.

Figure 7 *Elderly Blackfeet.* Piegan.

Figure 9 *Watching the Herd.* Piegan.

Figure 10 Unidentified. Piegan male.

Figure 11 *The Water Hole.* Piegan.

Figure 12 *Blizzard.*

Figure 13 *Up the Cutbank*. Piegan.

Figure 15 *Yellow Plume.*
Piegan medicine man.

Figure 14 *The Horns.*
Piegan.

Figure 16 *Powwow.* Piegan.

Figure 17 *Song of the Canyon.* Piegan.